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**Lessons from the Near East
and North Africa Regional
Housing and Urban Development's
Regional Programs**

1977-1997

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Introduction

Tunisia was the headquarters of USAID's Near East and North Africa (NENA) Regional Housing and Urban Development Office (RHUDO) for twenty years, from 1977 until 1997. The focus of this note is the regional information exchange and training program that RHUDO managed involving all countries in the region. Special emphasis will be placed on the final years of the program. RHUDO wrote in 1992:

RHUDO seeks to provide the extra-national-dimension which goes both above and beyond the individual country programs. The richness of the programs in the region can be built upon by sharing experiences and introducing new ideas through lessons learned from successful programs.

Throughout RHUDO's twenty years in the region, it promoted exchange programs among its partners. Where Tunisia had something to show another country, and where another country had something to demonstrate to Tunisia, the RHUDO was able to facilitate the learning process. These exchanges took place regularly beginning in the late 1970s and

The Regional Context

The Near East and North Africa region is geographically centered in the Mediterranean, yet it includes countries as diverse as Portugal and Yemen. The dominant culture is Moslem and Arabic, yet Portugal, Turkey, and Israel are important exceptions. The colonial experience in the region resulted in both francophone and anglophone countries. The economies range from advanced to nearly feudal. The political systems are varied; democracy is not the prevailing form of government. During the twenty years of the RHUDO's presence in the region, United States diplomatic policies consistently supported a peaceful solution to the Middle East conflict coupled with the survival of the State of Israel. Foreign assistance to many countries in the region was a part of this political strategy and the RHUDO's activities played a significant role in this strategy. In terms of development, a need for water resources is common to almost all countries in the region. All countries in the region are also experiencing rapid urban growth and most cities and countries have been unable to successfully manage this growth.

continued until 1997. In the late 1970s these exchanges permitted Moroccans to learn about the new slum upgrading policies that Tunisia was trying out and to begin to adapt them in Morocco. Not only did exchanges involve Tunisia, but also other countries, e.g. Morocco and Algeria, and Morocco and Jordan. Tunisia and Egypt linked up on water

issues. Algeria and Portugal exchanged information and visits concerning cooperative housing. Regional seminars and conferences also led to RHUDO being able to reach a number of countries, including Algeria, in which there were no USAID shelter and urban development programs.

RHUDO's Bilateral Programs

The major focus of the RHUDO was on programs that took place in specific countries that the RHUDO either managed or for which it provided management support to USAID Missions and Embassies. Over the years, these activities, Housing Guaranty programs and other kinds of housing and urban development programs, took place in Morocco, Portugal, Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. As also happened in other regions, when the activities became sufficiently large and important, for example in Morocco, Jordan, and Portugal, the RHUDO would station a housing and urban development officer in those countries to directly manage the programs, under the closer supervision of the USAID Mission, but with continuing RHUDO technical support. Bi-lateral programs gave the RHUDO the opportunity to build a regional program.

The culmination of this experience came during the RHUDO's final years in the region with its regional information exchange and training program, and the creation of the Regional Advisory Committee, an organization that has now assumed a life of its own in the region, as an independent regional NGO, dedicated to addressing urban issues.

The Regional Information Exchange and Training Program

RHUDO carried out many training and regional exchange programs during its first fifteen years in Tunisia. However, it was only in 1992 that a formal regional training strategy was synthesized and resources provided for its programs on a systematic basis.

These activities fell into several different categories. They included regional policy seminars that discussed subjects of great current interest in the region. These policy seminars had actually been initiated in 1988, with a conference on Land in 1988 in Portugal and a Conference on Housing Finance in Jordan in 1989. Subsequent regional policy seminar topics included community participation in environmental activities and the financing of municipal infrastructure.

Other kinds of activities, in addition to the regional policy seminars included: the establishment of collaborative relationships with regional and international organizations, including IULA (International Union of Local Authorities) and UNCHS (United Nations Center for Human Settlements); training workshops that involved more than one country; exchange visits within the region; and a newsletter that was widely distributed in the region.

However, probably the most significant and ambitious attempt to initiate a sustainable program in this area involved the establishment of a regional network, called the RAC (Regional Advisory Council). This effort, the creation of a regional NGO that may someday be a powerful force in the region for the advancement of enlightened urban policies, is unique. Originally intended to advise the RHUDO on its regional training activities and help it to define an urban policy agenda, the RAC has now taken on an independent life and a new name the NENA (Near East and North Africa) Urban Forum and will continue after the departure of the RHUDO to act as an independent non-governmental regional body concerned with urban issues.

The Urban Forum has already begun to function. It is based in Cairo, with members from Egypt, Turkey, Yemen, Jordan, Lebanon, Tunisia, and Morocco, Gaza/West Bank, and Algeria. Its Mission Statement is broad:

The purpose of the NENA Urban Forum is to identify key urban challenges facing the NENA region and, from them, define an urban agenda for the region. The Forum assists its individual and institutional members and their respective countries in conceiving and promoting innovative practices in support of improved urban development policies. The Forum serves as a mechanism to share experiences and information among members and promote partnerships among members' institutions.

At its first executive committee meeting in 1997, the Forum decided a number of administrative matters as well as identified several issues for inclusion in the urban agenda that will be proposed at its general meeting in October 1997. These included the contribution of micro-enterprises to the urban economy, and gender issues. Each country will also develop its own more specialized agenda. Financing will be assured for the next two years by contributions from donors, although it is intended that the organization become self-supporting.

The RHUDO regional program was a success. While more could have been done had there been additional funds and while some criticism was voiced about the need for a greater flow of written information, these are minor in comparison with the results achieved through the numerous seminars, workshops, and exchanges (see annex). There were a number of elements that made this possible:

- The sense of Arabic solidarity is strong in most countries in the region and this encouraged people to participate enthusiastically in the programs. A common language and colonial experience were important.
- The program was seen to be locally inspired with strong local input. The involvement of the RAC was essential as a way to encourage participation and to foster this sense of local pride. The RAC was viewed by participants as prestigious and participation as a personal honor.

- The RHUDO devoted considerable human but only modest financial resources to making the program a success. Annual outlays never exceeded \$150,000 but the program was well managed and a high priority for the RHUDO.
- The program was seen to be more than an American foreign assistance effort because it involved other donors, such as the World Bank, UNDP, UNCHS, and bilateral donors such as the French and Germans.
- RHUDO's presence in the region and its involvement in the successful Tunisian program enabled the RHUDO to point to a number of solid achievements. The regional program made strong and repeated use of Tunisian examples in its training and information exchange programs.

Tunisia as the Site of the Regional Center

Being present in Tunisia, the RHUDO was able to build an intimate understanding of Tunisian institutions and the people with whom it worked. Continuous presence also permitted the RHUDO to offer better informed and more appropriate technical assistance. It permitted RHUDO to better understand the reasons for delays and changes in programs and permitted Tunisians to better understand American concerns. The end result was a solid grounding in the programs undertaken. This led to increased sustainability and a better foreign aid relationship. Ultimately, this led to increased flexibility on both sides, a feeling of shared goals and objectives even if specific programs might encounter difficulties, increased respect, and a more productive relationship. The same amount of progress could not have been achieved without a continuous presence. Furthermore, this progress was an important element for RHUDO within the region. It afforded the RHUDO credibility as it established its regional program. It provided the RHUDO a locally based identity.

The major themes of RHUDO's programs in Tunisia became a learning laboratory for the rest of the region. Thus, upgrading, sites & services, core housing, subsidies, decentralization, strengthening local authorities, urban environmental services, community participation, and increasing the role of the private sector were all themes that were examined in detail in the region and which were the basic building blocks of the American-Tunisian program.

Lessons Learned

1. Establishing a successful regional program requires an understanding of the region and careful preparation and assessment. The selection of participants and the choice of topics to be covered must reflect the results of this assessment, not merely the wishes of the donor.
2. The regions or sub-regions need to be assessed as stated above. A sub-region like the Maghreb, or indeed a region such as NENA, has a number of common characteristics, such as language, culture and certain political goals. There is no magic formula

concerning common characteristics. Regions such as southern Africa and eastern Europe would be, on their face, also suitable. The key question would be what does each country have that another country could learn from. Countries that are less similar in terms of language and culture would need to be combined with countries that are more similar from an institutional or policy vantage point.

3. A successful program will require the sponsoring RHUDO or other entity to make regional activities a priority. It is far too easy for these kinds of activities to be relegated to the end of the line when it comes time to dividing up resources.
4. The model of having an on-going program in one country and using that as a base of operations and as a learning laboratory for regional exchanges and seminars is strongly recommended for the reasons enumerated in this Note.
5. The involvement of other donors is also very positive. This lessens the financial burden on any one organization and helps to bring other donors into understanding and pursuing the same policy goals. However, this collaboration needs to be closely monitored to ensure that goals are reached and that policies being promoted are the ones USAID supports.
6. Local involvement is crucial. The NENA model of a Regional Advisory Council was key to this involvement. In the Near East, it appears to have had the added advantage of structuring a sustainable policy organization.

Selected Regional Activities 1992-1996

Exchange Visits

- +Algeria - Tunisia (Land development issues)
- +Algeria - Morocco (Land development issues)
- +Morocco - Tunisia (Upgrading)
- +Tunisia - Morocco (Municipal infrastructure issues)
- +City of Sfax - City of Tetouan (liquid and solid waste)
- +City of Ankara - City of Tunis (Historical rehabilitation)
- +Egypt-Tunisia (wastewater issues)

Seminars and Workshops

Morocco 1993, The Urban Environment; Innovative Municipal Responses;

Egypt 1994, Open Cities: Community Participation for Sustainable Urban Development;

Regional Advisory Council

Annual meetings and workshops

Collaborative Relationships

Collaborative relationships established with the UNDP/World Bank Arab States Urban Management Program, United Nations Sustainable Cities Program, International Union of Local Authorities, Mediterranean Environmental Program, and numerous bilateral assistance agencies.

Newsletter

“El Imrane”, the regional newsletter was published for five years in both French and English.